

How Is Your Hearing?
Matthew 13:1-9
June 30, 1968

How is your hearing? That's really a better question than it might seem initially. Unless you have a physical problem, you are hearing something right now, that is, sound waves set in motion by my voice are striking the incredibly sensitive mechanism of your ears, in turn setting in motion an incredibly complex motor process which terminates somewhere in your minds. All this is happening right now; as fast as I am speaking; you are receiving sounds and transmitting them into ideas. You are hearing.

There are few things more fascinating than the physiological aspects of hearing. What you hear can have a remarkable physical effect. Some things I say may raise your blood pressure; cause you to blush, or reduce your metabolic rate to the point that you fall asleep. And it's all involved in this matter of hearing.

But even more fascinating are the psychological aspects of hearing. For instance, everyone of us is a selective hearer. There are other sound waves striking your ears at present, but if you are at all interested in what I am saying you are able to shut these out, and hear only what you want to hear. If you sit down at table with small children you know exactly what I mean. In that situation selective hearing is absolutely necessary to filter meaning out of chaos.

Beyond that, hearing gets very much involved with a whole lot of other personal, or psychological aspects of our selves. Two people listening to the same sound, invariably hear two different things; that is two different ideas emerge in their minds. If we are dealing with vocal sounds, someone speaking, what we actually hear is very much dependent on who we are, ~~the~~

who is doing the speaking,¹ where we are, and most important of all -- what we think we are going to hear. On occasion my children will approach me, saying "Daddy" in a certain tone of voice, and my response is "no". That is, I think I know what they're going to ask; I've already heard them, and to complete the mechanical process of hearing would be academic. Now that's not very good, and I certainly don't recommend it to you, and yet you and I are doing it all the time. When a minister speaks, the actual process of hearing begins before the sounds strike our ears. When a politician of the other party addresses us we hear him, and respond to him, long before he says anything. We do it all the time, and it's never good, in any circumstance.

Hearing is terribly important in this matter of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "He who has ears, let him hear." That terse statement was precipitated by a problem we have reason to believe bothered Jesus, and which has certainly bothered his followers for 2,000 years. The problem is this: the Gospel is Good News; the very best news men have ever received. In our day everyone has heard it -- that is, the good news has been put into words that in one form or another have struck every ear in the nation. But not everyone responds in the same manner. Many don't respond at all. Something has gone wrong. Is it the fault of the gospel? Is it really not "Good News". Is it the fault of the teller? Is the good news ambiguous, or confusing or distorted? That's possible. Or is it the fault of the hearer? Is the real problem this whole psychological process I've described, in which hearing in the final analysis depends more on the hearer than either the teller or the content of what he is telling?

Jesus asked that very question, and answered it by way of a story about a sower scattering his seeds.

New Testament scholars suggest that we are dealing here with autobiography; that the situation occurred late in Jesus' ministry: that it was precipitated either by a question put to him by one of the disciples, or by his own "thinking-out-loud" regarding the obvious fact that his people were not responding favorably to him. He had encountered and spoken with a lot of people in those three years; more often than not the response was either antipathy or hostility. Now he was asking "Why?" Hadn't they heard?

It is a familiar question for anyone who engages in any type of teaching and that means nearly all of us: the minister in the pulpit: the teacher in the classroom: the parent in the home. All of us wonder whether anything is getting through: whether we are even heard. How do we know, ultimately, whether what we teach is "taking"? Occasionally, miraculously, we discover that the seed did take root and sprout. Even so occasionally the teacher can look at a young life and see the evidence that his, or her, role has been important: that he, or she, was heard. But only occasionally. Mostly we live with the constant possibility that we're fighting a losing battle; that our words fall on deaf ears: that we might as well be saving our breath. Those of you who have ever taught in the Church School will know exactly what I mean, for the Church School class is perhaps the most irreligious of all situations in which to be a teacher.

In any case, I think we can feel the dilemma of Jesus as he put the question to himself. Perhaps at that moment there was a sower near by, scattering his seeds across a field. It's interesting in this sense that grain was sown before the ground was plowed in first century Palestine. The man, then, became a perfect illustration of the task of teaching.

Some of that seed wasn't going to grow. Some of it was going to fall on the path and be eaten by birds. Other seed would sprout quickly in the soil and then wilt because there would be no depth. Still other seed would sprout and flourish only to be decimated by weeds and thistles. The sower knew all this: these were the given risks in being a sower of seeds. And yet some were going to make it. He knew that, too. Some of the seed would fall on fertile soil, and grow and bear fruit, one hundred fold. And it wouldn't take many seeds, bearing one hundred fold to justify the initial labor of sowing.

Now the scientific American mentality recoils from this kind of carelessness. How much better to test the soil and plant only where the given risks are at least minimized. And yet Sowing - in that indiscriminate manner, was then, and is today, a perfect simile to the task of teaching.

Some of it is not going to take, for a variety of reasons. Maybe most of it isn't. But some will: and that justified the effort. The important thing is to be a faithful teacher: to keep at it: to keep sowing.

Now that's simple enough. But at this point a subtle shift occurs in the story Jesus concluded by saying, "He who has ears, let him hear." That is, it's not a parable about a sower at all - it's a description of different kinds of soil. It's not a homily on faithful determination in the task of teaching - it's an urgent commentary on the act of hearing.

In the final analysis, Jesus seems to be saying, whether a person hears or not, depends on nothing or no one so much as himself. Hearing is, finally, an act of will. A man hears what he wants to hear: and shuts out

what he prefers not to hear. It was one of Jesus' more offensive traits, of course. He could take a rather innocuous little story like this one and twist it ever so subtly until some burden of responsibility was pinned directly on his hearers. So it was in this situation - "He who has ears, let him hear."

There are some terribly important implications to all of this: some so obvious that I won't take your time to recite them. It is an important parable because hearing does break down in many vital areas of ~~your~~ life and mine.

I wonder, for instance, whether the Church ever hears the world. Do we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, ever keep our corporate ears to the ground, listening to what the world might be saying to us? It would seem not. For too long the church has led a cloistered life, conducting a monologue "at" the world, never bothering to listen to what the world is saying. One wonders, for instance, whether the rather dismal statistical position of the Church today might not be the result of simply being out of touch, for too long, with the world? We don't know what people are saying: we don't know what kinds of questions they're asking. And it's no wonder, really, that much of the world counts us out as irrelevant.

One wonders, for instance, whether race and poverty would be such major concerns today, had the Church been listening to the world down through the years. But we never heard - because we weren't listening. And now it's almost too late.

On a more modest scale I wonder how much we really hear each other. Do we, in fact, ever get around to really listening to what another person

is saying to us. I don't think so. I know that much of the noise emanating from the pulpit is not heard. I read books that tell me the pulpit is obsolete: that it is no longer a viable instrument for telling the Gospel. I know, because of a general antipathy, an almost complete lack of any response, that most of the words that flow from this wooden box just are not heard.

I've had the personal experience - and I know you have, too - of talking with another individual and not really being heard. The words are there of course; the mechanism is working perfectly, but hearing is not taking place. Rather the other is busily constructing the next barrage - or perhaps listening or looking somewhere else. That's frustrating: it's dehumanizing: it says "I don't really matter much to this person." But what really bothers me is the fact that I'm guilty of it myself - and so are you.

One of the telling signs of the times is the fact that a growing number of people have to pay \$25.00 an hour just to find a sympathetic ear; someone who will be quiet long enough to listen; someone who will take me and what I have to say seriously. Some one who will "hear" me.

I wish somehow we could change that. I wish the church could see itself as that community of individuals in which every member counts. I wish we could start being listeners to each other. Because that is the simplest, most basic, and perhaps most important way there is of being ~~being~~ loving another person: - affirming his importance by hearing what he says. "He who has ears, let him hear."

Finally, I wonder if we really ever hear the Gospel. One student of the New Testament has suggested that the story of the four different types of soil is really a rather accurate portrait of the average Protestant Congregation. And I'm inclined to agree. But I'm more concerned this morning about you and me: have we really heard? Or have we heard what we wanted to hear? You see, that's an important question because Jesus laid the responsibility of hearing on every man who has ears.

God has spoken. He has spoken in Jesus Christ, His Word made flesh. He has spoken a good word of love and freedom and salvation, and he has called us to respond by being his loving, free, serving, sacrificing disciples. The seed is sown. God has spoken.

How is your hearing?

Amen.

Our Father give us ears to hear thy word to us. Grant us to listen to each other, to the world, but most of all - to Thy still small voice. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.